

Take away the stone.

John 11. 27 - 44
Minster Evensong 10.4.16 (Easter 3)

I'm not sure that those who wrote the Gospels would understand the word 'soundbite', but I bet they would get the concept.

John Chapter 11 is worth reading again and again. It's the story of the death and the bringing back to this life of Lazarus. He's a close friend of Jesus, as are his sisters Mary and Martha. He's so ill that they send a message to Jesus, who chooses not to come to them until Lazarus has died. What you did in Jesus's day was put the body in a tomb, above ground. You let the body decompose, and after a year or so took what was left - essentially the bones - and put them into a casket which you then buried. In order to take away the smell of early decomposition, you wrapped the body in bandages, soaked in sweet smelling perfume and spices. That's what the women are doing on the day Jesus was raised from death: they hadn't had time to do the spice thing before the Sabbath started.

Mary, Lazarus's sister, is described in John 11 as the one who later anointed Jesus by covering him with a stunning amount of perfume and spices. John tells the story in the next chapter, and Jesus says that this anointing was the perfume for his grave clothes. She knew about death, and knew that Jesus had said he would die, and soon. She knew about preparing a body for burial. She knew what it was to grieve and grieve: Lazarus had been dead for four days after all. But she now knew that the death of Jesus was going to bring in something remarkable. What Jesus had done in bringing Lazarus back to this life showed that death, devastating as it continued to be, would be put into its place by Jesus. Martha and Mary and Lazarus now knew the reality of Jesus' words: "I am the resurrection and the life."

Listen then to the soundbites in this chapter. "Yes Lord I believe". "Where have you laid him?" "Jesus began to weep." "Take away the stone." "Unbind him and let him go." When you visit people preparing for a funeral there is a heightened sense of awareness. Every detail is vivid, especially of the person's last days and hours. Words spoken and events which have happened are etched into the memory and are of massive significance. Where there is death there is a more profound sense of life. Every sense is heightened. No wonder this story is so vivid, even down to Martha saying that there will be a smell if you open the tomb.

"Yes Lord, I believe". Martha says this before Lazarus comes back to life, though she remembers the words after all these events. What does Martha believe? Before Lazarus is brought back to life it is belief and trust in Jesus: it is faith in what she has not yet seen. Now she has more to go on: Lazarus has been brought back to her. These words are given to us after Jesus has been raised by his Father, and this is not a bringing back to this life. Jesus is raised to the new life we will all share, one where there is no more death. Lazarus, tearing off his grave clothes, will get old and die again. Not so Jesus. And not so those in Christ, who through death will live the resurrection life for ever with God.

"Take away the stone". "Unbind him and let him go". Words spoken about Lazarus coming back to this life are now spoken to us. We will not be sealed in death's tomb for ever. We are not bound by the tight wrappings of our mortality. We will die, and it will hurt those who love us, and that's why Jesus weeps. But we will be raised, in Christ. The stone sealing our tomb will be rolled away. The sweet smelling grave clothes will be

unwrapped from us. There will be rest in peace, and we will be raised to life by the power which raised Jesus from the dead.

That is why Easter changes the world. And that is why these are more than soundbites. These are words to be seared into our souls, burned into our memories. Like Martha we can say "Yes, Lord, I believe." And in the face of cruel death we can say "Take away the stone". For Christ is risen. He is risen indeed. Alleluia.